

Karma and Reincarnation

From Maschera e volto dello spiritualismo contemporaneo

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Liber esse, scientiam acquirere, veritatem loqui

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Karma and Reincarnation

At the centre of its doctrine, Theosophy, as we mentioned, intended to bring the attention of modern men back to the truths of a forgotten wisdom, in regard to which, as its source, it referred above all to the Orient and in particular to India. To which teachings of real value could Theosophy attract attention? And what misunderstandings and deformations are superimposed on them by Theosophical assumptions and vulgarisations?

Here we will limit ourselves to the examination of two notions that are pivotal to the Theosophical conception: karma and reincarnation.

In the Hindu tradition, karma means “action”. One fundamental view of this tradition is that “from action (karma) this world was created, from it, it is sustained, from it, it will be dissolved”. In particular: “The being arises in conformity to actions (karma). Beings are the heirs of action.”

These statements are clear in themselves. They allude to a general and elementary law of causality. It is only necessary to note that here the term “action” – karma – is applied not just to action in the strictly material sense, but embraces a much vaster type. Every thought, every desire, every habit is equally karma. Besides, karma extends to orders of influence elusive to the common man; it connects effects to remote causes from much different planes; it goes beyond the limits of the visible and of a single form of existence and unlike what happens through the laws of physical causality, it does not unfold only in the dimension of time. Nevertheless, what remains in it is the character, easily seen in the laws of nature, of impersonal relationships in a necessary sequence. So, when it is about man, the law of karma does not say to do or not to do, but states simply the happenings of an effect, once a given cause has been created. It informs and does not determine. If one is free, for example, to light or not light the fire, one can not then pretend that the fire, one lighted, does not burn. In terms of karma, this notion must be extended to everything that exists in the manifest world, whether as corporeal world or as psychic, moral, intellectual and spiritual world, both in the lives of men and those of invisible forces and of the “gods”. According to the doctrine in a word, everything forms itself, transforms itself, or passes on in this way, as above as below: through pure relationships of cause and effect.

One is therefore in the order of a universal determinism, which however does not exclude freedom, but rather presupposes it as the initial cause, beyond a beginning virtually capable of producing new causes, new series of tendencies, actions, and reactions, in agreement with or opposed to what is already in act. What karma excludes are the ideas of both “chance” and “destiny” and of “providence” in the anthropomorphic sense of the principle of divine interventions or sanctions of a moral character.¹ Action and freedom therefore exhaust this vision of the world. Every being is what it makes itself. Karma only draws the consequences from created causes and the I with the current of its life only follows the ditch that it, knowingly or not, dug itself into. So guilt and merit, sin and virtue – in the Western sense – do not even exist. There are only material, psychical, or spiritual “actions” that will necessarily lead to certain material, psychical, or spiritual conditions. A priori, all lives are open, above

¹ This conception, for that matter, is not exclusive to Oriental teaching. In classical traditions, the same notion of “providence” did not have a “moral” character, with relation to the care of a god theistically conceived, but it was thought, precisely, as a collection of conditioned and impersonal laws, as they could be the warnings, to do it or not, given by the objective science of a doctor – to use this Platonic example. (Enneads, III, iii, 5)

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and below. Self-determined by one of them, there is nothing to hope for or to fear, except what will proceed impersonally from the nature of this life. In the most absolute sense, each thing and each being are left to themselves.

This teaching leads to a purification of the glance. It accustoms us to consider each thing under a lucidity and a law of *reality* analogous to that which is in force in the free world of things. It liberates us from the fantasies of both fear and hope. It leads back to itself as to something simple, strong, self-supporting. And that is the premise of every higher realization.

Such is the sense of karma according to tradition, to which its notion legitimately belongs. But what became of it in Theosophy?

First of all, karma moves from the idea of freedom to a typically modern type of evolutionistic determinism. Instead of the plurality of free paths – which from the point of view of the individual is the elementary truth, every further conception belonging to the metaphysical plane² – it substitutes the unique direction of an obligatory “progress”, in which there would only be the alternative of following sooner or later.

In fact, according to the Theosophical views, the “gods” and the adepts would be beings who had gone further ahead in “evolution”; the animals, “our younger brothers”, less “advanced”. But it will be a question of time: everyone will reach the door, those who are further ahead “sacrificing themselves” for the others; and the varieties of karma will have served only as instrument to “universal progress”. As is clear, all that can only be considered as a digressing and distorted addition of Theosophy to the authentic notion of karma. It should therefore not cause surprise if this notion often passes from the plane of a transcendental realism to a more or less Philistine moralism, becoming a type of sword of Damocles suspended over the head of whoever does not conform himself to the “laws of evolution” and to the related altruistic, humanistic, egalitarian, vegetarian, feminist, etc. corollaries professed by the movement. With that, even the practical value, the liberating potentiality of this teaching, which we already mentioned, must be lost completely.

In Theosophy, karma has a specific connexion with reincarnation. Theosophy praises itself for having brought to the attention of the West this other “teaching of ancient wisdom”. In reality, given the limitation of the horizons of modern men, for whom this existence is the beginning and the end of everything, nothing comes before and after it, apart from the vague religious idea of the afterlife, which at this point no longer even constitutes a living idea – given this limitation, to arouse the sense of coming *from far-off*, of having experienced many other lives and many other deaths and of being able to still advance from world to world, beyond the end of this body, would certainly be a plus. The bad thing

² Effectively, the traditional teaching knows the idea of a higher order, which corresponds to the Far Eastern notion of the “Way of Heaven” (Tao), to the Hindu *rita*, to the Hellenic “cosmos”. But it is a valid idea precisely only in the metaphysical sphere and therefore must not be confused with the human notion of “design”. An allusion to the relationships between this higher order and the plane of freedom and of causality (karma) is given, if ever, by images like that of de Maistre, whereby the universe is comparable to a watch which always shows the right time, even though each of the gears moves by its own reckoning, or as in the Chinese saying, that order is the sum of all disorders. However, there is no tangible interference.

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is that in Theosophy the whole is reduced to a monotonous series of existences of the same type, that is, terrestrial, separated by intervals of a more or less attenuated corporeity. So the limitation is precious little removed from it. Theosophy believes it can support itself on an ancient doctrine, but in reality it is based only on forms of it that are in fact exoteric and popular, and have no sense of the order of things in which they should be arranged.

In order to resolve the problem of reincarnation one should begin with clarifying that of survival, which Theosophy is not concerned with in the least, as much as its positive “spiritualistic” solution and, to tell the truth, as personal survival of every human soul, it seems certain to us. The closest idea to reincarnation as the Theosophists profess it is found perhaps in the Vedanta. But the Vedanta has a basis to it: it has the theory of the Self, of the immortal and eternal Atman, identical to the Brahman, the metaphysical principle of every thing. This theory refers to a spiritual state of man’s consciousness which is no longer to be found in the men of today, but formerly in the humanity of the Buddhist period. In Buddhism we find in fact the doctrine of the *anatma*, that is, of the denial of the essentiality of the soul and of its continuity whatsoever. Here it is not a question – for Vedanta compared to Buddhism – of two philosophical opinions opposed to each other, but of two theories that are different only because they refer to two historically different spiritual positions. The soul (atman) that Buddhism denies is not what the Vedanta affirms. The soul of the Vedanta is none other than what Buddhism considers not as a present reality in each man but rather as a means that can only be reached exceptionally by means of asceticism. Here one could establish a relation with the esoteric sense of many traditional teachings and myths, even Western, as for example with that of the “Fall”. It is about ascertaining, at a given moment, the identifying of the personality with a conditioned psychic form and separated essentially from the body: from here, the birth of the “I”, which a modern man can relate to; the “I”, whose transience and unreality Buddhism, on the basis of a metaphysical realism, asserts reasonably and forcefully.³

Now the sense that reincarnation could have in those in which the “I” was more or less directly valid as a universal principle, superior therefore to every particular individuation (atman = Brahman, Vedanta) is not the same as the sense that the same doctrine of the most recent times can have if brought back to the ordinary human “I” and closed in on itself: in the latter, the contacts are severed, there is no longer anything that, like an unchanging silk thread, traverses and unites an indefinite series of pearls representing the singular existence. With the sense of self joined univocally to the support of a body and a brain, the outcome can be the definitive alternation of that continuity of individuated

³ It is interesting to point out that the period of the birth of Buddhism (circa 600 BC), assertor of the doctrine of *anatma*, coincides with that of the rising of philosophic and naturalistic thought in the Orient and above all in the West (Greece): that is, with the manifestations of logical consciousness tied to the brain, which takes the place of anterior and superior forms of consciousness that constituted the existential basis of doctrine, as in the Vedanta.

It is rather important to take account the great traditional doctrines are not mere human inventions, and their differences are not arbitrary, but relative to the adaption of the teaching to essentially different historical-spiritual conditions of things.

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consciousness that already with birth (which extinguishes the memory of all prior experiences)⁴ has at once a first blow. In the face of this existence, the spirit as “personality” is also facing a fundamental risk. And it is no longer a question of reincarnation in the Vedantic sense: instead, it is a question of a choice of “salvation” or “perdition” that, in a certain measure, is decided on this earth. Perhaps such are the sense and the concrete historical *raison d’être*, of the teaching on the subject that are taken up in the more recent traditions, as for example the Catholic or Islamic.⁵

For the average Western man this teaching is therefore true, it is no longer reincarnation in the Vedantic sense. So if today one still wishes to speak of reincarnation, one can no longer speak of it through the soul as personality, but through other principles included in the human entity and always in a sense that excludes, furthermore, a true continuity of personal consciousness. He can tell himself that that which in the present conditions is eternal and what is transmitted from being to being is no longer the “immortal atman” (the superpersonality), but it is “life” as “desire”, in the Buddhist sense of the term.⁶ It is the deep and animal will to live, in the terms of a species of subpersonal entities that create an always new birth, that is the matrix of every mortal I, and, at the same time, the barricade to higher worlds. We are therefore brought back to things to which we noted already in the treatment of psychoanalysts [see Chapter III]. If at this point we want therefore to continue to speak of reincarnation and of karma, the vision according to reality needs to be sought in teachings of the Buddhist type, which has in view precisely the transient soul or, as an exception, the soul liberated in the state of nirvana through asceticism.

According to Buddhism, a man who has not reached awakening and spiritual illumination with his thoughts, words, and actions (karma) has nevertheless generated another being or “demon” (called *antarabhava* or also *vijnana*) sustained with its unsatisfied longing for life which receives fundamental tendencies from it. In general, this being survives death. The inevitable force of the inclinations which comprise it and which no will still restrains, leads it back to earth, towards a body and a life conformed to its nature; joining itself to physical and vital elements provided by parents, it constitutes the basis for the self-manifestations of other entities below the type of man which, distorted themselves by “desire”, join each other there and assimilate according to laws of affinity, coming up short of other states of existence. A *new* human consciousness is born in such a manner, as an entity rather more complex than what is commonly believed, composed of diverse inheritances; an entity, which does not have a true relationship of personal continuity with the one that died. However, on the one hand, a law of cause and effect (karma) can lead back to the preceding life, the origin of what, as a specific form, became the

⁴ One understands therefore why Catholicism, the relation to the period in which it was formed, had to declare *heretical* the doctrine of the pre-existence of the soul to the body. In reality, the soul, as only “human” soul (and today one cannot speak broadly of different souls), is born with the birth of the body.

⁵ The worsening of the alternative: salvation-perdition, which can be observed in Protestantism in respect to Catholicism, must be explained with the character every more physical that the I has assumed in the times, still more recent, of the Reformation, contemporaneous to so-called “humanism”.

⁶ As was already noted, translated into moral terms, this notion corresponds in Catholicism to the theory of the inheritance of “sin” that the flesh of man would bring, from Adam, as *cupiditas* or *appetitus innatus*.

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antarabhava, and on the other can explain why the composite inevitably attracted the new being that is incarnated.⁷

Apart from the “spirits”, the ghosts and psychic residues which we spoke about in the critique of spiritism [see Chapter II]; apart from the *antarabhava*, the blind creature sprung out from the trunk of desire – nothing else survives death, conforming to personal continuity, in anyone who already in life has not achieved a certain degree of illumination. If instead this degree was reached – only then can one speak of a survival through the *soul*: the soul can, preserving the continuity of consciousness, also face those post *mortem* experiences, for which we have already cited a lamaic text and the totality of which could be designated with the term *purgatory*; to face them in a way to be able to achieve this or that state of existence beyond the human and subhuman world. In every case, only what belongs to the earth comes back to the earth. The “soul” does not come from other bodies, but from other worlds, that is, from other conditions of existences, and does not go into other bodies, but if it escapes the “hells” by adapting itself to its supernatural ends, it goes into others of these “worlds”. The repeated passage of the soul (not of this or that psychic complex of which the soul of mortal man is composed) under the condition of a human body represents an absolutely exceptional case. Through the soul there can therefore be *transmigration*: something in fact distinct from *reincarnation*, which can be verified only through inferior principles of the human compound, of the most collective and impersonal sort.

In its general lines, things stand thus through reincarnation in relation to present-day man. What echo is there in its doctrine that Theosophy asserts instead? Every theory or superstition – let us repeat – is always, under whatever aspect, a barometric index of the times. One can say that “reincarnation” is a correct idea if it refers uniquely to that irrational entity that, having used up a body, in its uniform and inexhaustible thirst for life passes into other bodies, never elevating itself to a higher plane.

Since in our days the beginning and the end of life for the greater number of men is used up in a similar way of being and the case of “liberation” presents itself more and more as an anomaly, so it can be said that for humanity of the present period reincarnation in the sense of a perennial terrestrial re-arrising has a certain margin of truth, apart, naturally, from what optimism adds to it in the direction of “evolution” and “progress” and apart from the supposition of everything gratuitous, of an “immortal ego”, in place of which there is instead a precisely “natural” and subpersonal entity with its creatures not connected in any true continuity and with its *appetitus innatus*, the root of every becoming in temporality and which the Orient calls *samsara*.

Also on this topic, one can point out the lack of every truly supernatural view as a characteristic of Theosophy. From the point of view of the human state of existence, there is not a true supernatural without a premise of dualism, and the “evolutionistic” conception of Theosophy flatly contrasts with that premise, asserted by every higher civilization. As in the Catholic tradition there is a very clear boundary between the temporal order and the eternal order, so in the Oriental traditions there is a clear

⁷ One can designate the irrational form with which a soul identifies itself and remains composed of various human psycho-vital functions, with the term *daemon*, in the classic sense, and to remember the Plotinian teaching that the soul “has chosen ahead its daemon and its life” in conformity to the nature of the tendencies that it developed in itself (Enneads, III, iv, 5-6)

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distinction between the endless series of possibilities and of “rebirth” subordinated to becoming and desire (possibilities that include as many “divine” states as human and “infernal” states) and true liberation. That series is represented by a perpetual circle (a concept that is found again in the Hellenic tradition: *ho kyklos tes geneos*) and here every “progress” is illusory, the mode of being does not change substantially even when they reach forms of existence well beyond the common level. Liberation corresponds instead to an exceptional way, “vertical” and “supernatural”, equally far and equally close in respect to any point whatsoever of becoming and time. Instead, Theosophy abolishes this opposition: the two terms are placed on the same plane; the supreme goal is conceived as the end of an “evolutionary” development through the conditioned world and an endless series of rebirths. So where it speaks of a development, it is not the personal soul that it can have in view, but rather the natural and animal stock of “humanity”, and its “spiritualism” is, at bottom, reduced to a mystical addendum to the utopias of collective social progress with those exigencies and preoccupations that, from a higher point of view, seem to be more worthy of the name of zootechnology than of ethics. Then, as to the immortal “ego” given to everyone, it is precisely what happens by putting to sleep, by averting the reality of the alternative: *salvation or perdition* which is to be resolved in *this* existence – therefore by preventing the way of true liberation.

Such an anti-supernaturalistic spirit of Theosophy is evident not just here. Among the principles held by the movement there is that of the immanence of “One Life” in every form and in every being, and there is, at the same time, that of the duty for individual “egos”, to achieve an independent self-consciousness. With an odd application of the anti-aristocratic concepts typical of certain new morals, they even speak of a renunciation of the primordial divinity that was “possessed without merit”, in order to then re-attain it oneself ... “deservedly” through struggle battle and hard experiences of the repeated immersions in “matter”. That, in Steiner’s reformed Theosophy, corresponds to a complete plane in which “Ahriman” and “Lucifer” were duly enlisted. Thought through, this view should lead, as a logical consequence, to that “One Life” – that is, the aspect “one” of Life – it represents the “least”, the substrate, or *materia prima*, from which every being forming itself, should differentiate itself as a distinct beginning; therefore, putting value precisely on a law of difference and of articulation. Instead no: the “One Life” becomes the goal, the perfection. In spite of the various calls back to the traditional way of super-human conquest and the occult tools gathered from the most varied sources, the idea of development in Theosophy is coloured by mystical tints and inclinations toward the degenerating direction of a simple blending of oneself with the substrate of the undifferentiated “One Life”, rejecting the “illusion of separateness” and of the “ego”.

Even here, it is about the confusions that proceed from the incomprehension of a metaphysical teaching indistinctly seen: since the purely metaphysical notion of the “Supreme Identity” has nothing to do with the notion of “One Life”. It is a serious error, moreover, equally committed by certain neo-Vedantist currents, distinct from Theosophy and directly imitating the indiscriminate teachings of other gurus of today, epigones of Hinduism, to also exchange the promiscuous *pantheistic One*, in which, to quote Hegel, everything becomes equal as in the “night where all the cows are black”, with the *metaphysical One* that is the integrating summit of a well articulated, differentiated and ordered whole, of forms, of a cosmos, in the Greek sense. What is, in Theosophy, the effective reference point, is seen,

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moreover, from the consequences: from the corollary of the democratic ideals of brotherhood, love, egalitarianism, universal solidarity, the levelling of the sexes and classes, in place of that virile law of hierarchy, difference, and caste that the great traditions have always known when they had the right direction for a living axis: that of the integration of man's supernatural dignity into the suprasensible. And this is one of the most determinate points, in which, even in formerly outer circles, apart from the doctrinal confusion, the Theosophical current together with various other "spiritualistic" currents akin to it, constitute a factor that in the crisis of contemporary civilization meets the others at work on so many planes precisely in the direction of a regression into the collective and the promiscuous.